

## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief Notes

#### 1. Introduction to the Bible

1. The Bible is a collection of books, written by men (and possibly a few women) about God and God's relationship with his Creation, and particularly the human part of that Creation. Some Bibles have two main sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. Some Bibles have a third section, the Apocrypha, with books mainly written in the years after the Old Testament was completed and before the New Testament began. Most of the Old Testament books were originally written in Hebrew, and the New Testament books were written in Greek. The Old Testament books in particular were often the work of more than one author, and were edited by others. The 39 Old Testament books took their final form over a period of more than 1000 years. The 27 New Testament books were written within a few decades of the events they describe and reflect on. *Authors, chapters, verses, are later additions.*
2. Our 10 o'clock service has four Bible readings, but in addition the words of the service very often reflect Bible words, as well as celebrating Bible

events. When a reader says "This is the word of the Lord", he or she is not claiming to quote God talking in English. He or she is saying that This is one of the many different English translations (prepared by people who had studied and prayed, and who knew their stuff), from what was written many years ago in the language of their time, and in the circumstances of their time, by other people who by prayer and study, and through personal encounter, had learned something of God that they wanted to share. *Writers and editors were inspired by God* (if they hadn't been, what they wrote then would not have much to say to us now). *They were not on the whole dictated to by God.*

3. *It is very wise to take seriously what the Bible says.* It is very helpful to learn about why, and where, and when, what you listen to or read was written. *It is very dangerous to take literally everything that is said in the Bible,* and especially to take it out of context and apply it literally to your own situation. Jesus was not afraid to take hallowed and familiar Old Testament texts, and say "This says this, but I say something different". *God* chose the route of gradual revelation over many centuries, and that process continues. He *didn't choose to write, print and publish his own book, and make it available through God bookshops, in each of 3,000 plus languages.*
4. Some books are either literally true, or they are not much use. A rail way timetable that tells you the train leaves at 9 30a.m., whereas it actually leaves at 9a.m., is really not helpful. With other books, the right question is not whether it is literally true, but whether it helps you understand something better. A love poem about a beautiful girl/handsome man will probably tell you far more about the person than their doctor's clinical notes - though the notes are factual whereas the poem probably isn't. The poem will tell you a lot about the feelings of the writer, whereas the clinical notes don't (and shouldn't). *The Hebrews of Old Testament times and the Jews and Greeks of New Testament times were perfectly capable of distinguishing between the measurement of a foot, which had to be accurate for the shoe to fit, and the description of God at work, which had to blow you away but didn't require a pocket calculator.*
5. The Old Testament contains law (appropriate to the times), history, myth, philosophy, prophecy, poetry, and dreams, and teaching about relationships. The New Testament, written by people who knew their Old

Testaments very well, contains records of what Jesus said and did, reflections on who he was, accounts of the lives and witness of the first Christians, guidance on how to live the Good News of Jesus, and a dream about the future which has many echoes of a similar Old Testament dream.

6. Everyone at St George's has some knowledge of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, and probably some idea of what the parable teaches. It is probably a picture story, rather than a "true" story; and none the worse for that. Similarly, everyone has some knowledge of the Old Testament story of Noah's Ark, though maybe not such a clear idea of what is the teaching point of the story. So how do we know that Noah is a picture story and not a literally true story? Well, and for instance: a similar story is found in other ancient civilisations, but without the O.T. teaching points; there is absolutely no way a boat of the dimensions given could contain more than a fraction of the birds and animals of the time; the story in its present form preserves two different reasons for the flood, two completely different instructions on what animals to include, two different flood durations, two different endings, and two different names for God. *Myths are not fairy stories.* They are powerful ways of teaching about things arguably more important than the things science can measure or speculate about. Incidentally, the Book of Genesis (which has a number of helpful myths) was probably put together after the Jews returned from exile in Babylon - centuries after the latest events reported in Genesis.
7. Fairly recent discoveries of Old Testament texts centuries older than the oldest previously known texts confirm the accuracy of the texts we already had. Archaeology on the whole supports Bible accounts of historical events, even where these had seemed rather improbable. We know that in cultures where the history was carried in the head rather than written down, memories put our memories to shame. Where there are records in surrounding civilisations that have been preserved, these often tally with the Biblical accounts of the same events. *Much Bible history, and especially the New Testament history written while many witnesses were still alive, often has the edge on political history: some of which was written centuries after the event, and most of which was written by the winning side.*

8. It is tempting for the Christian to argue that we don't need the Bible, since we have the Living Lord and his promise of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus himself relied on and used the Old Testament, and if he thought that study worthwhile, who are we to think we don't need Old and New Testaments? At her Coronation the Queen is given a Bible, with the words *"Here is wisdom. This is the Royal Law. These are the lively oracles of God."* When David became our Vicar, he was given a Bible by us, with the words: *Receive this book which contains the word of God..... We for our part must be faithful in reading God's word."* Are we?
9. **Which version of the Bible?** English speakers are rather spoilt for choice. If you want traditional language combined with accuracy, and a Version that often coincides with the readings at the 10a.m. Service, the **New Revised Standard Version** is a good bet. (There is also a New King James Version.) **New International Version** is a good modern English translation. A very stimulating version with the ability to catch the meaning and punch it home is the **Message Version**, which is more paraphrase than translation. You can get the NIV and the Message Version bound together in the same book.
10. **Aids to Bible Reading:** "An Idiot's Guide to the Bible" by Derek Williams, published by Paternoster Lifestyle, is a useful overview of the Bible and its individual books. Probably better, is "**The Bible from Scratch**" by Simon Jenkins, published by Lion Hudson. Both books are written to be entertaining as well as informative, and are illustrated, especially the Jenkins book.
11. **Commentaries:** Arguably, **New Daily Study Bible** reprint of William Barclay's commentaries (Saint Andrew Press) is still as good as you can get. **Bible Reading Fellowship's** The People's Bible Commentary covers all the books of the Bible in bite-sized chunks. The Bible Speaks Today series, from Inter Varsity Press, is heavier going, but appeal to those who like questions answered rather than opened. **Tom Wright's** Commentaries on the New Testament, in the "For Everyone" series, published by SPCK, are good value.
12. **Bible Reading Notes for home use:** The Bible Reading Fellowship produces a variety of notes.

August 2010.

## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief 10 Pentecost

1. Being a Christian does require you to think hard about being a new person. On the whole, you don't need to learn a new language. Most of the important things that have to be said about Christianity can be said in ordinary English. However, sometimes there are new words to learn. Whether you call it Pentecost or Whitsun, the name (as well as what happened then) needs some explanation. In Chapter 2 of the Bible Book of the Acts of the Apostles we have the story of how a rather scared group of people, who feared dying as their friend and leader Jesus had died, were inspired to begin a bold public ministry that in due course captured the Roman Empire and spread to every part of the globe. The date is pinpointed in Acts as "the Day of Pentecost": that is the Jewish Festival that was celebrated *50 days* after the Passover.
2. Pentecost was connected in Jewish thinking with the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, and thus seen as in a sense the birthday of the Jewish Nation. For Christians, this post-Resurrection Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian Church (50 days after Easter). Whitsun is not a Biblical name, but reflects the tradition of Baptism on this day of converts, who

wore *white*.

3. You need to read Acts Chapter 2 to get a feel for the excitement of the first Christian Pentecost. Those anxious at the time to play down the significance of what was happening accused the disciples of being drunk. This was a harvest festival, at which the wine flowed freely. Later commentators anxious to play down what happened argue that the disciples only had to speak Greek to be understood by most of the racially mixed crowd.. However, the disciples were clearly surprised themselves by what happened to them and through them, as well as the crowd being surprised; and neither drink nor Greek satisfactorily explains what happened—least of all the conversion of cowards into heroes. Symbolically, what happened was a reversal of the Genesis (Tower of Babel) story of human beings being divided by speaking different languages.
4. Historically, there has never been a repeat of what happened on this particular occasion: missionaries have had to spend many years labouring to translate the Gospel into the 2000+ languages in which it is now told. (Sometimes, they have had to create a written language, because the local language had never been written down.) We still talk about “the gift of tongues”, and some people still experience it, as St Paul did; but this is a strange ecstatic experience producing sounds that are not intelligible to anyone else unless there is a translator present. “Tongues” are experienced in the Pentecostal Church, but not only there. The Pentecostal Church might be described as a fellowship of Christians which tries to maintain the heady excitement of the first Christian Pentecost in its worship and ministry.



5. It is impossible to discuss Pentecost without saying something about the Holy Spirit, and therefore touching on the easily misunderstood (and not

easily understood) Christian teaching that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You don't need to spend long thinking about the universe and its 13 billion years plus history to conclude that any language we use to describe the Creator and Sustainer of that universe is going to be pretty inadequate to the task. (C S Lewis suggested that it is a little, though only a little, like the earthworm trying to describe the gardener.) The Church can not reasonably be blamed for "failing to explain God". It can sometimes be blamed for adding on its own complications.

6. Interestingly, Celtic Britain was fairly receptive to Christianity because its major deities were already seen as trinities in themselves; and the Celts got that from closeness to the created world, not from speculation in a dusty library. The Trinity is an experienced understanding of God, not a philosophical speculation; and don't for heavens sake imagine that when you get a closer view of God you are going to see an elderly chap with a beard, a younger man with a smaller beard, and a sort of ghostly figure in the Halloween tradition. (Paintings are perhaps even more doomed to mislead than words are, at least if we think of them as photographs rather than impressions.) Quite often, people who quietly live out wholly lives have a better feel for what God is like than those who spend their lives trying to find the right words!
7. Different translations of the Bible use different words, but in many translations the Bible begins and ends with the Spirit: Genesis Chapter 1 verse 2, and Revelation Chapter 22 verse 17. In the Old Testament, God at work is often referred to in Spirit terms. In the New Testament, Jesus and the Spirit go together, and when Jesus finishes his physical time of earth he promises to continue there as long as the earth lasts in the Spirit.
8. Some folk just have to keep vexing themselves about the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit - probably the same people who are bothered about the relationship between body, mind and spirit in human beings. For some, the concept of praying to the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit, helps a little; and Paul is fairly clear that in his experience praying to the Father made sense because he knew from Jesus that the Father listened and cared. When his prayers dried up, the Spirit refreshed his prayers. For most of us, it is probably more helpful just to focus on what we know about the work of the Spirit; and to get on with praying/living, without too much speculation on the currently (and per-

haps always) unknowable.

9. In the Confirmation Service - where the Spirit is represented in the tongue of fire shaped bishop's hat, and maybe in the dove on the altar frontal and in some of the vestments, and much spoken about in the prayers - those being Confirmed are offered what Paul calls in his Letter to the Galatians (Chapter 5) the Gifts of the Spirit. These are listed as Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Humility and Self Control. The underlying thought is that we all appreciate these qualities in others, and dabble in them ourselves. But we can't maintain them consistently, as our own prime characteristics, without a lot of help - especially help from the Holy Spirit.
10. The Message translation of Galatians puts it this way: *We develop a willingness to stick with things, as sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshall and direct our energies wisely..we have chosen the life of the Spirit, let us make sure we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads...but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. This means that we will not compare ourselves with others as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.*
11. Each of the words or pictures associated with the Holy Spirit helps in its own way:
  - The Greek word Paraclete means standing beside you, supporting you.
  - Comforter means Strengthener, rather than feather-bedder.
  - Fire represents warmth, but also something you don't mess with if you are wise.
  - Wind represents a powerful force, seen in what it does rather than visible in itself.
  - Breath represents something basic to life, without which none of us is going to get very far.
  - Dove - pictured in Creation story, in the Ark story, and in the Baptism of Jesus - represents gentleness and goodness.
12. We can think about the Holy Spirit as God prompting us to get up when we would rather lie down, and to stand firm when we would rather run Away.

*October 2010.*



## **St George the Martyr Shirley**



### **Brief 11**

#### **Good Friday and Easter Day**

1. The church tends to have its largest congregation at Christmas. Easter comes next in popularity. Good Friday is well behind. The first Christians devoted very little attention to the Birth story, and instead focussed on "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". They were above all an Easter People. The Crucifixion on its own spoke powerfully of God's love, but it was the Resurrection that showed the triumph of Love: that love was stronger than death.
2. There are hints in the Old Testament of both a suffering and dying saviour and of resurrection. Jesus pointed these out in his teaching, and his followers, once they had lived through his death and resurrection, recognised the significance of these Old Testament references. However, at that time Jewish believers were divided over the idea of individual personal resurrection (the Sadducee priests rejected the idea); and most Jews expected a Messiah whose destiny was not death, but the conquest and death of their national enemies.
3. We see in the Gospels Jesus trying to get across that there would be a Good Friday and an Easter Day, and Peter and the others refusing to listen. We see them shattered and scattered by their leader's arrest and

murder, and we see their real difficulty in accepting the joyful news of his resurrection. It is worth pointing out that, in a culture where men were in charge and women were not even accepted as reliable witnesses, it was women who stayed by the cross (and one male disciple) and a woman (Mary of Magdala) who was the first witness of the resurrection and therefore essentially the first Apostle.

4. A dying god was not a wholly new concept, but the older versions were more about the cycle of birth-death-birth (e.g. the sun rising and setting) than about resurrection as we now understand it. Both Jews and pagans found the idea of God Incarnate being stripped naked, flogged, nailed up in public, and left to die, profoundly disturbing. This was the brutal shameful death reserved for political offenders...and normally followed by the body being dumped, perhaps to be eaten as carrion.
5. So, why? At one level, the answer is easy. Jesus made powerful Jewish enemies, who saw him as a threat. Especially when seen as a Messiah, he was an irritation if not a threat to the Romans; and the Jewish leaders wanted him crucified as a political threat to Rome rather than stoned as a heretic to the Jewish faith. Or, in terms of sharing in the common lot of humanity at that time, when most died young and there was minimal health care and no anaesthesia, a painful death at a young age was to be expected.
6. But in Christian thinking there is much more to it than that. Human sin had driven a wedge between God and human kind that human kind on its own could not remove. "Un-love" had created a debt that the unlovely could not pay. Wickedness had created a burden that the wicked could not carry. Old and New Testaments share the view that the wages of sin is death, and the price of sin is separation from God. In Jesus, God revealed both the cost of sin and the depth of love. Please don't be misled by the dreadful theology of some beautiful hymns: the Crucifixion did NOT "satisfy the wrath of God". As some of the war poets, and many pastors seeking to walk with those whose nearest and dearest have suffered, have noted: God up in heaven looking benevolently on is not at all the same thing as God on earth suffering with us and for us - and bringing redemption out of our suffering and His.
7. "There is a green hill far away" and "When I survey the wondrous cross" say some of what needs to be said.



8. Easter changed everything for ever. It began for the guards on the tomb we know not how, though there is a lot of speculation. The Risen Christ didn't need to move the stone. So who did, and why? The soldiers risked being killed for deserting their posts. So why did they disappear? What we do know is more important. Recognition came for Mary when the man she hadn't recognised spoke her name. That one word "Mary" is the best punch line in the whole Bible, and personalises the Resurrection as a promise for us as well as a reality for Jesus and the female disciple who, perhaps alone, had taken seriously Jesus' warning of his pending death. (When she anointed him.)
9. There are a number of certainties about the resurrection: leading the first Christians literally to pin their lives on it. First, Romans made no mistake about executions. Forget any idea that Jesus slipped down from the cross, stuck on plasters, and walked home. Second, the resurrection was not "wish-fulfilment": not even Mary expected it. They thought it was all over with their hopes. Third, this resurrection was transformation, not ghostly survival. It wasn't even ordinary life with the roughness smoothed out. The resurrection life was revealed as more real than the mundane life that had preceded it. Fourth, Jesus was clearly saying to them then and us now that resurrection is bodily and individual. Absorption into the divine (whatever that means) is the expectation of some Eastern faiths. Survival of the Jewish people or of the human race has been another view of the hereafter. This resurrection is about you and me, recognisably ourselves, but transformed into what we were meant to be.
10. C S Lewis in "The Last Battle" (last of the Chronicles of Narnia) and in "Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer" has useful things to say about resurrection and heaven. What he says is speculation, but it is good speculation. His focus on transformation is probably closer to the truth

than the familiar funeral texts about just slipping into the next room as though nothing has changed. Musically, the Resurrection Symphony (Mahler) has a lot to commend it.

11. Bishop Tom Wright has been emphasising that while the conventional picture has been of dying and going to heaven, with whatever sorting out of good and bad deeds is required during the in-between time, the Bible seems to be saying something rather different. That rather different thing is reflected in the Communion Service phrase *Keep you in eternal life*, and in the Kingdom Prayer *Thy kingdom come and will be done on earth...* Revelation Chapter 21 does talk about a new heaven, but the focus is actually on a new earth...or, if you like, a return to what earth was meant to be (just as we become what we were meant to be). It probably isn't a coincidence that Adam is pictured in the creation story as a gardener, and that Jesus in the resurrection garden was mistaken by Mary as the gardener. Perhaps in one sense she wasn't mistaken (For some of us, the garden is a more attractive picture than the city as a vision of the hereafter!)
12. The earliest Christian greeting of which we have knowledge is "Christ is risen!" That is still used as Easter Eve moves into Easter Day. There is a story from Russia during the Communist era of one of the anti-God rallies, when an atheist regime was determined to shout God down rather than just quietly forget Him. The anti-God speaker shouted for an hour, and then paused for breath or vodka. An old (and brave) Russian priest stood up and proclaimed "Christ is Risen!". The crowd roared back "He is risen indeed!" End of rally.
13. There are plenty of good, and some great, Easter hymns. There are some great Easter poems. One poem that sticks in the mind because it recognises the worst that human beings and circumstances can do, but offers hope, is the poem called "Faith" written by Studdert Kennedy, chaplain in the First World War. It finishes: *So through the clouds of Calvary - there shines His face, and I believe that Evil dies, and Good lives on, loves on, and conquers all.....For God is Love. Such is my faith....You want to argue? Well, I can't. It is a choice. I choose the Christ.*

October 2010.

## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief Notes

#### 2. Prayer

1. Prayer can seem to be an odd activity. If God is in charge, knows our concerns, and knows what is best for us (or is necessary as part of a bigger plan), what is the point in telling God what God already knows or trying to impose our wisdom on an infinitely wiser God's purposes? Prayer seems like offering infants the opportunity to take charge of family, and indeed community, national and global decision-making.
2. When Jesus urged us to pray (and that is our starting point), he wasn't encouraging us to kid ourselves about our infinite wisdom, or to waste our time, but offering us a (prayer) partnership with God. As the Retreat Association describes it, *"Prayer is a time of encounter, when we open ourselves to God working within us"*.
3. For Christians, the key indicators that prayer and being a Christian are not just related but inseparable are that Jesus told us to pray, that he prayed himself (indeed prayer was the backbone of his ministry), and that the discipleship group (Church) he left behind prayed individually and collectively and consistently - prayer was their core value.

4. Many books of prayers and books about prayers have been written down the Christian centuries. We hope in due course to publish as a St George's booklet the Odd Business prayer series that has been appearing in the church magazine, along with the short prayers from the magazine. Among books on prayer, *"The Path of Celtic Prayer"* by Calvin Miller (Bible Reading Fellowship), *"Sister Wendy on Prayer"* (Continuum), *"Prayer - a beginner's guide"* by Jane Holloway (Bible Reading Fellowship), and *"Letters to Malcolm - Chiefly on Prayer"* by C.S. Lewis (Collins), are good value. Among books of prayers, *The Lion Book of Prayers*", *"The Hodder Book of Christian Prayers"* by Tony Castle (Hodder and Stoughton), and any of the Michel Quoist books - e.g. *"Prayers of Life"* and *"Pathways of Prayer"* (Gill and Macmillan) are good value.
5. If you were taught to pray at home or in Sunday School, and what you were taught still works for you, fine. However, your other conversations have probably developed over the years, and maybe your conversation with God should also develop and diversify. There are few if any prayer rules, but a personal prayer armoury might be something like this:
  - **Keep in mind the left hand, palm upwards - thumb, gap, and four fingers: Praise - Silence - Saying Sorry - Saying Thanks - Asking for Others - Asking for Yourself.**
  - **Pray anywhere, any time (often "short" arrow prayers), but set aside a morning and evening time as a regular structured prayer slot.**
  - **Offer to God what is on your mind: no point in pretending and no need to exclude "small things".**
  - **Use your own words (or your own silence).**
  - **Use other people's prayers if and when they help.**
  - **For regular prayers, use the place(s), the position (sitting, kneeling...), the visual aids, the Bible passages, that suit you.**
  - **If you are in too much pain, too ill, too worried, too angry, too afraid, to use words, just pray what you are where you are. "Offer your pain!"**
  - **Keep a prayer diary of people, causes, prayers you have read or made.**
6. *Does prayer work?* If you mean "Will I be able to bend God to my convenience?", probably not. The key example is Jesus in the Garden

of Gethsemane praying that his Father would let him avoid crucifixion. A few hours later, he was dying on the cross. Notice that Jesus added to his prayer that over-riding little phrase ***Your will be done: the phrase that we include every time we say the Lord's Prayer, while desperately hoping that what God wants will comfortably coincide with what we want.*** If you mean **Does God answer prayer?**", the answer is Yes. The Father answered Jesus' prayer by enabling him to go through, triumphantly, what he very much wanted to avoid having to go through.

7. It's important to be honest about this. When we pray for someone we love to get better, we usually mean just that. (Though sometimes, when the person is very old, very ill, or in very great pain, we mean something else.) We may well be praying not just that God will help the doctors and nurses to do a good job, but that God will circumvent medical science, and do a miracle. It isn't wrong to ask for what we want: indeed it would be dishonest to do otherwise. But, while hoping that God will see things our way (and sometimes God does), we have to recognise that God knows best, and hope that one day God will explain to us (and/or to those we were praying for) where we "got it wrong". **Prayer is more about helping us to see things God's way, than about getting God to see things our way.**
8. Praying in church can be a problem. It is clear that, for us as for the first Christians, a prayer life needs to include praying together and praying individually. However, if the prayers are familiar, they may drift over us because they are too familiar; and if the prayers are not in the book and are new to us, they may drift over us because we are not tuned in. In either case, the prayers may not reflect our mood, our immediate concerns, our priorities. So? Three things: 1) **Use the silences to pray your own prayers.** 2) Relate what you hear to your concerns. 3) Recognise that God's mercy is (thankfully) wider than our immediate interests. (As citizens, we should have a concern for education and child support, even if these no longer directly affect our interests. *As Christians, we should have wider concern for the Coming of the Kingdom than the things that impinge on our daily lives.*) 4) Highlight in your mind one particular familiar prayer in the service, and think/say AMEN a little louder. **(Amen means "Yep, that's what I want. Count me in!")**
9. **Prayer Groups and Plus Prayer:** Prayer Groups can be pious chat groups with free therapy. But they can be a strong force for good in a

parish, and they certainly have been that in this parish. It is as natural for Christians to pray together as it is for them to work together; and work and prayer go together - often with prayer prompting and reinforcing action. (As Ignatius Loyola said, *Work as if everything depended on you; Pray as if everything depended on God.*) "Plus Prayer" is about including prayer in meetings, whether Bible studies or business meetings. Again this can be a ritual...like Lawrence Olivier as Richard III crossing himself after murdering one of his potential rivals. It needn't be an empty ritual, if it is done in the expectation that the God who is being invoked may actually take a hand in the agenda, the discussion and the outcome.

10. **Power Houses of Prayer:** "All we can do now is pray" is a very familiar expression, which relegates prayer to a desperate (or indeed totally useless) last resort, to be deployed once all the really useful things have been tried, and by people who are now "out of the battle" and sitting helplessly on the sidelines. Now, if you can swim, and see someone drowning who you are able to rescue, getting down on your knees and trying to recall a prayer for those in distress, is not the first priority. Even then, you could do worse than pray an arrow prayer as you dive in. If a friend (or stranger or enemy) is in financial distress, and you can afford (even if barely) to help them out, prayer is not a substitute for financial assistance; but prayer along with the cash can be very helpful.
11. For most of us for most of the time, our ministry is one of **prayer and action**. People who join a monastic order where the whole-time ministry is prayer have chosen to commit to praying in support of the action of others and in support of the needs of others. Often the others are very conscious that they could not do what they do without that prayer support from Power Houses of prayer. *The Psalmists recognised millennia ago that God can do more with prayer than with a horde of cavalry.*
12. Just as important as the monastic orders is the prayer ministry of those who are wholly or mainly, because of age, disability, or circumstances, out of sight and off the visible battle ground/ scene of the action. St George's and the Universal Church owe an enormous amount to these unseen disciples. In God's version of reality (and that is the ultimate reality), house-bound prayers may well count for more than years of meetings and hours of physical activity.

*September 2010.*





## **St George the Martyr Shirley Brief Notes**



### **3. The Communion Service**

1. Holy Communion is one of the two Sacraments (out of a total of seven) that the Gospels record Jesus himself as having given his Church. The other is Baptism. The word sacrament isn't in common use outside Church circles. It comes from the Latin Sacramentum, which was the Roman soldier's solemn promise to be a faithful soldier. **You could say that in the Communion Service Christ commits himself to us, and we commit ourselves to him.** The Latin sacramentum is a translation of the Greek word Mysterion, which means a mystery. The way Christ is present in the Communion Service is a mystery. It stays a mystery despite centuries of clever people trying to explain and define. Since it remains a mystery, these notes do not discuss the technical terms transubstantiation and consubstantiation, over which both tears and blood have been shed. It is enough to use the term Real Presence.

2. Holy Communion arose, through the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, from the Jewish Passover, either the actual Passover Meal or one of the special meals during the Week of Passover. For the Jews, Passover meant (and means) not just remembering but re-living the Pass Over: in which the Angel of Death passed over the houses of the Jewish slaves in Egypt, and those slaves were freed to begin their 40 year trek back to the Promised Land.

In the same way, for Christians the Communion Service is a re-living, not just a reminder, of the Last Supper shared by Jesus and his friends in the Upper Room in Jerusalem before Jesus made his supreme sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary/ Golgotha. In particular, *the actions of the priest in taking, breaking, blessing, sharing bread, and taking, blessing, sharing wine, mirror the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper.* (Water is added to the wine, not as an economy measure, but because of the Gospel record that when the soldier thrust his spear into the side of Jesus on the cross to make sure he was dead, water and blood both came out...which doctors say is quite likely.)

We tend to think of the Gospels as giving the earliest accounts of what happened at the Last Supper, and it may be that the Gospel accounts were circulating first. However, in terms of being published, Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is first. In this, Paul shows that the Maundy Thursday story and the Communion Service that flowed from it were already well established in the Early Church - that is within a few years of the events of Passion Week, and while a number of those present were still alive.

4. The Communion Service is known by many names, each saying something about what is happening. "**Communion**" emphasises fellowship, and is a reminder that Jesus was keen on meals with friends, and described the Kingdom of Heaven in terms of a meal/party. "**Eucharist**" means thanksgiving in Greek, and is a reminder that as Jesus gave thanks, so should we. "**Lord's Supper**" describes precisely what it was and is: the priest celebrates/presides, but the Host is Jesus Christ. "**Lord's Table**" is favoured in churches where the altar is seen as a meal table round which the Christian family gathers, rather than as a reminder of the sacrificial altar in the temple and more for the priest than for the people. "**Mass**" refers to the Latin ending of the service: "Ite, missa est" - sending out those who have shared in the service to live their faith in the workaday world.

5. Most Christian traditions have a Communion Service, but not the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends (Quakers). Some churches have Communion Services on most days, and several on Sunday. Others do not always have Communion on Sundays. In most Churches, an ordained minister "stands in for Jesus", assisted by lay helpers. The minister/priest makes it clear that *the specialness of the service lies in what Jesus and the Holy Spirit do, not in what the priest does.*

At St George's, at the 10 o'clock service, after a welcome from the priest, the Reader leads the first part of the service (including the "ministry of the word"), while the priest always leads the second part of the service (the "ministry of the sacrament), and in particular the consecration of the bread and wine. Lay people are authorised by the bishop to be Eucharistic Ministers/Chalice Assistants.

6. We sometimes refer to the Communion Service as a "sacrament of unity". It is indeed a **point at which Christians can meet on equal terms**. There was an occasion in Canterbury Cathedral when a handicapped man received the consecrated wafer from the Archbishop himself, and broke it in half and gave half back to the Archbishop, who happily received it. Many Churches admit to Communion baptised members of their own Church who have been prepared for this, by Confirmation or otherwise, and members of other Churches "who are in good standing with their own Church". However Roman Catholic churches in this country do not invite members of most other Churches to receive Communion, and discourage their members from receiving Communion in other Churches - as much because of disagreements about who is a priest as because of disagreements about the nature of the Communion Service.

7. *Relationships are key to taking part in the Communion Service*, and in the service as we have it taking part, rather than just being there as others say and do things, is important. No matter how often we receive Communion, and no matter how old we are, we ought to be both reaffirming our faith and opening ourselves to change. Relationships are emphasised in: being there as a group, not as isolated individuals; in the opening exchange between priest and people reminding us of our on-going encounter with God; in the Collect for Purity; in an eloquent reminder of God's love for us ("God so loved the world..."); in confession and absolution; in the history of redemption told in the Gloria and the Creed; in the readings and often in the sermon; in the Prayer of Humble Access, which puts us in our places! **Relationships are refreshed in the Peace.**

8. There is a particular meaning, a particular history, and a particular importance, in every part of the service— spoken or acted, for example in the carrying up of the bread and wine from the back of the church by members of the congregation;

followed by the reminder that we have bread and wine only because of the God of the harvest, followed by the breaking, blessing, sharing that Jesus instituted....along with the new commandment (mando in Latin, and hence Maundy) to love one another in the pattern of Jesus' loving. *If frequent participation ever makes the service a bit routine, focus on one part of the service each Sunday, and savour that part.* (The Comfortable Words - where comfort means strengthen rather than lull to sleep - is one possible focal point.)

9. There are learned and lengthy books on how the Communion Service developed over the centuries. The first Christians had no churches, and house communions for small groups who know each other (e.g. the MU Prayer Group or the Young People's Group) are probably as close as we can get to the feel of the first Communion Services. The young people use a version of the service written originally by a member for one of the weeks away (and not by the bishop). The Parade Service version is also home-made, and approved. At the 10 o'clock Service we use one of the Year 2000 Common Worship options, and at 8 o'clock on the first Sunday of the month another Common Worship option. At the 8 o'clock service on other Sundays we use the Book of Common Prayer (1662, and derived from the English prayer books of 1552 and 1549). Those taking House Communion to members of our congregation who are house-bound use a short form of the Communion Service, and already consecrated bread and wine - the wafer intincted with wine (touched with or dipped in wine).

**10. When we gather at a Sunday morning Communion Service, it is good to remember absent friends, those all over the world doing likewise (some of them at great personal risk), and the generations of Christians who have gathered together for the breaking of bread.**

11. For further discussion of Holy Communion see the Durham Liturgical Committee's series of leaflets on the Eucharist. (2008)



August 2010.

## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief Notes

#### 4. Disasters and Divinity

1. It is good to read the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, in which year after year there are “natural disasters” - in a society with much greater exposure to nature and much less protection from it than we in this country experience in the 21st Century. It reminds us that there has always been an uneasy relationship between human beings and nature—sometimes provoked or exacerbated by our behaviour, sometimes not. What we are much more exposed to than our Anglo Saxon predecessors is news of “natural disasters” in other parts of the world, for example at the moment in Pakistan, China, Russia, and, as always, parts of Africa.
2. **Faith systems, including Judaism and Christianity, were born and developed in a “natural” world well known not to be always man-friendly.** Indeed there is a strand in the more ancient faiths of negotiation with “God” to escape the worst effects of an unpredictable and uncontrollable universe. Where there is belief in one Creator God, rather than in warring gods whose enmity sucks us in, the issue of disasters and divinity becomes a real issue.
3. *The Old Testament tends to the view that flood and earthquake and plague are acts of God—directed against evil doers, including the Cho-*

sen People when they betrayed God's trust in them. If you describe God in words that mean all-powerful, this does rather push you into the view that God causes whatever it is, or at the very least chooses not to divert a "natural" (originally God-given) process that now threatens disaster. This isn't the whole truth about the Old Testament: Elijah found God in the still small voice, not in earthquake, storm and fire. Other prophets see God more in human activity within a natural setting that is sometimes hostile and sometimes friendly. *Job*, in a book that talks more sense about suffering than most books of philosophy, refuses to subscribe to the idea that "everybody gets what they deserve"...and *eventually comes round to the view that we can't make sense of suffering, but we can maintain our integrity despite it...and trust that God will one day make sense of what to us seems senseless.*

4. The debate about the issue is sometimes rather confused. People who claim not to believe in God may nevertheless blame God for disasters. People who do believe in God may credit God with disasters that seem to validate their view of how God ought to behave (sometimes in zapping people with different God beliefs), but absolve God from involvement in disasters which hit people who share their faith. However, *the fundamental, and understandable, debate (and it is often not an academic debate but a passionate cry for understanding) is about how we, who have a human right to struggle to understand whatever the inevitable deficiencies in our human understanding, can reconcile a loving God and an un-loving world/universe.*
5. In the New Testament, there is less comment on disaster and divinity than you might expect, but there are clues. **Jesus rubbishes the "you get what you deserve" belief.** He says that disability is not the result of sin....without of course denying the obvious reality that wicked or merely stupid behaviour can bring disaster, and not only on the perpetrator. (He warned the people of Jerusalem that they were rushing towards the disaster of the destruction of the Temple and the end of much that was central to Jewish faith and practice.) **He said that disasters affected good and bad alike.**
6. The Book of Acts reports the "natural disaster" of famine that struck Judaea during the days of the Early Church. Unlike the Roman Emperor's attempt to blame the Christians for the fire that destroyed much of Rome, the early Christians apparently made no attempt to explain

the famine in terms of many Jews not accepting the Gospel, or some Christians not living it. *Instead, they mounted a major relief effort in order to relieve the famine.* St Matthew's Gospel in particular, and the Book of Revelation, speak of major natural disasters as part of the end things, when this world/universe is folded up and a new one created from the ruins. While both accounts of the end things draw a fairly black and white distinction between good people and bad people (a distinction that many Christian thinkers would question), there is no suggestion that good people escape unscathed and only the bad suffer. Indeed, *the Christian heroes are the martyrs....and being a martyr implies something very nasty before something very splendid.*

7. If you believe that the material universe is fundamentally hostile (to the human spirit), you probably don't have much problem with disasters: on that approach, the world is a battle ground/testing ground, with death as the escape. *If you believe that the material universe and we in it are fundamentally meaningless, then debating the whys and wherefores is pointless, since with no meanings there are no answers.* (Though you may still, as a non-believer, work hard to reduce the misery of a meaningless world, and God bless you for that.) If you believe that all, or most, natural disasters are the result of our misuse of the natural world.. and of course some are....you get perilously close to the truism that if we were not here we wouldn't have a problem with being here! (If no body lived within 15 miles of the Thames, some environmental issues would be avoided, but the population of London wouldn't exist.)
8. **Christianity has one unique thing to say about both man-made and natural disasters (and about those disasters which are a bit of both).** This is the extraordinary assertion that God suffers with his people. The Jesus story is of God at the heart of human suffering (of all kinds) - not causing it, but experiencing it. Maybe, in theory, God could have created and gone on creating (since creation is not a once for all thing) a universe in which nothing ever went wrong, and nothing and no one ever suffered: A sort of guaranteed Garden of Eden. We would probably need to be much braver than most of us are in dealing with our own pain to say with complete confidence that this sort of world would be intolerable; but it would certainly be very different. **In the world we do have, the assurance that God shares our pain is worth having.**

9. What of prayer, in the context of a world in which there are disasters and of a God who doesn't allocate those disasters to those who we might think deserve them? *We have encouragement to pray about what concerns us, and to pray for what we believe to be best for us and for other people. In putting prayer into the equation, we are not guaranteeing the outcome that we want.* The tidal wave may not stop where we would like it to stop, or the landslide pass by on the other side of the road. **But God invites our prayers so that God can use those prayers, not in order to ignore them.** Where we pray for victims of disaster, whether or not we are among those victims, it is to work with God in stirring up those who could help - whether from a distance or on the spot - including ourselves where there is something we could do... and there often is.
10. The Letter to the Hebrews (which many of us like to think was written by a woman) finishes with *a commissioning prayer that invites us to meet Jesus "outside the camp", or, if you prefer, "outside the comfort zone".* That means in a real world in which where there are disasters that we can not prevent, which have victims who do not deserve to be victims (and does anybody ever deserve disaster?), **we are called to be present.** A bystander asked where God was, as he watched a twelve year old girl being hanged to death over a 45 minute period during the man-made disaster of the Holocaust, for having helped another victim. The response was "There on the gallows". This was a Jewish conversation. If a Christian asked where God in Christ was during the man-made disaster of the Twin Towers, the answer might well be in the New York fireman climbing up those many stairs into the heart of the inferno as others escaped downwards.
11. God has not given us an explanation of disaster, at least not of all disaster. *He has called us to a partnership of love in how we respond to disaster.* It might have been simpler had we been able to maintain a steadfast belief that God loved the Jews and hated the Egyptians or loved the British and hated the Germans (or Russians), but it never was that way, and indeed it never convincingly appeared that way. (None of the Jews who escaped the flood that drowned the Egyptians reached the Promised Land.) As it is, **we have to find and share and show the Love of God in a world where personal and collective disaster is common.**

August 2010.



## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief Notes

#### 5. Miracles

1. Whether your starting point is believing in miracles, not believing in miracles, or a mixture of belief, disbelief and uncertainty, it helps to start with defining what a miracle is (or would be if there were any). C.S. Lewis in his excellent book "Miracles", says he uses the word to mean *an interference with Nature by supernatural power*. Herbert Lockyear in his detailed study of "All the Miracles of the Bible" (200 plus) quotes several definitions, of which the first is *a work wrought by a divine power for a divine purpose by means beyond the reach of man*. On the whole, if an event is wonderful, and very unusual, and hugely beneficial, but there is a rational explanation, it won't count as a miracle. An event that is completely out of the ordinary, and that can't be rationally explained, but that apparently serves no useful purpose, tends not to make it as a miracle.
2. **We have to be careful about using miracles (things we can't explain) to prove the existence of God.** The cautious critic will make the valid point that the certainty is that we can't yet explain. To the child, most things are miracles. More important, surely God works within "the

laws of nature, and not just outside them? *If he only worked outside what are his own laws as Creator, God would be an inconsistent sort of creator.* You might argue that the Roman Catholic insistence on sainthood being proved by miracles (though not miracles alone) underestimates the saintliness of people whose goodness is demonstrated by works where cause and effect don't need a miracle explanation..

3. It's interesting, though not surprising, that the scientist who argues that events that are well vouched for but for which we have as yet no scientific explanation (such as our existence in this world, against all the odds) will one day be intelligible, is not all that far away from the religious person who argues that miracles can probably be "explained" by deeper laws of God that underlie and if necessary override the natural laws (of God) that we have captured in the science text books. (In the same way, wise lawyers recognise that sometimes justice ought to override laws.) It is also interesting that the definition of a miracle as divine action beyond the reach of man flies in the face of the *Bible, which shows many of the miracles, and perhaps all of them as being God acting in partnership with men and women.*
4. This point about partnership merits further comment. Whatever the truth or otherwise of the colourful details of the Nativity (details which get a passing mention at the beginning of two Gospels and are then ignored), there is no escape from the Christian assertion that **the Incarnation is one of the very greatest of the miracles.** That miracle required the willing participation of Mary of Nazareth. Christian teaching is that God entered the world in this way in order that we might have his company on the journey to God. The Resurrection miracle required a different sort of partnership, but if there had been no Roman soldiers, no Joseph of Arimathea, no witnesses..? It required human partners to tell the Resurrection story. Most important, this one-off miracle was enacted to set the pattern for, and to make possible, our resurrection journey into the Kingdom. **The underlying God law is that Life is stronger than death: the Resurrection miracle is the rule, not the exception.**
5. Luke, as the "doctor" Gospel writer and the keen observer, has a slight edge on Matthew and Mark in reporting Jesus' miracles. All three record substantially more miracles/signs than John. It is important (and challenging) for Christians to remember that in the Gospels the followers of Jesus begin to share in his healing miracle ministry; and that in

Luke's second instalment (the Book of the Acts of the Apostles) the miracle ministry continues- often in what the disciples do in the name of Jesus, sometimes in what God does for the disciples so that they can maintain their ministry. (For example, releasing them from prison, or, a different sort of miracle, allowing them to continue their ministry and witness from prison and indeed through their deaths.)

6. *Luke knew as well as anyone that those Jesus healed from their physical or mental infirmities, and those whose lives he restored after everyone else had thought them dead, were a minority of those who suffered from illness or disability, or who died prematurely, during those years. When he wrote about the Early Church, Luke knew perfectly well that the disciples in exercising their healing ministry did great good for many people but hardly dented the incidence of sickness and disability. Paul seems to have had a significant health impairment, that wasn't healed despite his asking. Luke claims no healing miracles for himself, though he of all people might have been expected to want to heal: maybe modestly, maybe he believed his writing was even more important. Maybe, like Christian doctors and nurses today, he healed with skill and prayer but didn't label the healing as miracle.*
7. **What the miracles reported by Luke and others do show is where God would lead us: to seek to heal, to be aware of human need, to be beside those who suffer, to go outside with the outsiders and to include the excluded, and to work with God to use natural resources and master natural hazards for the common good.** Prayer and laying on of hands do sometimes produce what can only be described as healing miracles, for which conventional medicine can offer no explanation, but as often their effect is experienced in the ability to live more positively with health problems and disabilities that do not go away. We can't explain why healing sometimes works in a way we need but didn't actually want as a first priority, and sometimes works in the way we want. C.S. Lewis finishes his essay on Miracles by encouraging us to *pray and work for good outcomes, including "miracles", knowing that our prayers will always be taken into account; but never to turn ourselves into magicians, by "knowing" that we can "work" miracles.*
8. As Christians, we think of Jesus and miracles, and, less often but following Luke, of early and later Christians as *miracle partners* with Jesus. We tend to forget the Old Testament miracles. In the Old Testament, a

miracle is an event that is against the odds, with no natural explanation, and connected with praying to the Lord. The events of the Exodus, the taking over of the Promised Land, the victories against stronger foes, loom large in the miracle category; but there are also healing and feeding miracles, and miracle signs to show hesitant people that they were on the right lines (or not!). Much energy has been invested in trying to find "natural" explanations for the crossing of the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds, for manna in the wilderness, for the retreat of hostile armies. We know vastly more science than the Hebrews knew. But if we were able to sit down and discuss with the Old Testament writers, they would say *thanks be to God for using "natural laws" as well as the special underlying laws we still call miracles.* (they might also point out that their history of defeat, failure and destruction, didn't incline them to believe in centuries of "Jewish magic".

9. They might well remind us that arguably the greatest miracle is the survival of the Jewish Faith, older than (and more persecuted than) any of the world's great faiths.
10. *So , are the days of miracles, which Luke and John and Paul saw as significant, but not all-important, over?* Do we now discount what Luke and others saw as miracles, because we are better informed or just more cynical? No, to both questions. **Incarnation, Redemption and Resurrection are still fundamental miracles for Christians.** So, for those who believe in the Real Presence in the Eucharist, is what happens at every Communion Service. Then there are still healings, including both getting better and coping better healings. Moreover, Christians believe that God has built into the natural world, with all its various partly understood rules, a role for the power of prayer, which we also imperfectly understand. **There is much to be said for the holy childishness of seeing all sorts of daily miracles of nature and humanity...rather than losing a sense of wonder in the bland confidence of partial "understanding".**
11. Do we have to believe that St Kevin was a saint because he knelt praying with his hands stretched out long enough for a blackbird to lay an egg and hatch it (and, presumably, fledge the chick)? No! Apply the "did it really serve any useful purpose?" test. And, do something useful instead of trying to replicate this unlikely event. *August 2010.*

## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief Notes

#### 6. Christmas

1. *If your measure of "real" Christianity is what the earliest Christians did, then Christmas isn't a Christian festival. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day were celebrated in the very early Church, though not by major festivals but in weekly worship, in early creeds, and in conversion and nurture teaching. The very early Church was a missionary Church, without buildings of its own, without much in the way of structures and rituals, living on the edge, and living in expectation of the Second Coming. Cross and empty tomb would have meant to those first Christians what they mean to Christians (and to many others) now. Manger and stable, and most of the rest of what we associate with the Incarnation in Nativity plays and on Christmas cards would have meant nothing to those first Christians.*
2. There is an important distinction here. For all Christians at all times, **the Eternal God becoming one of us is of huge importance: a turning point in human history.** Nor was this God dressing up for a brief spell, and then thankfully returning to normal (like the best man donning hired coat and tails and then putting them back in the plastic bag before the reception). Christ, perfect God and perfect human, took our humanity

with him when he left the earthly dimension for the eternal dimension. It doesn't get any more important than that.

3. *It was late in the 4th Century before the Western Church formally adopted December 25th as the special day on which to celebrate the Incarnation, with a Mass (Communion Service) of Christ (Christmas). It was the early 13th Century before we got the crib. It was the 19th Century before we got much else that is now associated with "traditional Christmas". It was well on in the 20th Century before cash registers began to ring louder than church bells, and Christmas cards appeared in the shops during the Summer holidays - a few of the cards vaguely "religious", most not.*
4. **We don't know when Jesus the Christ was born.** May or earlier in the Spring have been suggested. Pope Julius I chose December 25th as a counter to the X certificate Roman feast in honour of Saturn (Saturnalia), and because the turn of the year, when, in the West, the days began to lengthen, seemed a good time to celebrate Light coming into a dark world. So, essentially, *Christmas is a pagan feast Christianised...and now perhaps being re-claimed by the pagans.*
5. Other than for Mary of Nazareth and Jesus' immediate family, it was the last three years of Jesus' earthly life, and particularly the last week, that mattered. *Of the four Gospel writers, only Matthew and Luke give any birth details.* Matthew reports Mary as a virgin, Bethlehem as the place of birth, the wise men (number unspecified), the star, the three precious gifts, the flight to Egypt to escape Herod (who massacred Jesus' Bethlehem peer group), and the return to Nazareth the home town of Mary and Joseph. Luke, who seems to have talked to Mary, gives more detail. He gives the virgin birth, Bethlehem, the shepherds and the angels, and the return to Nazareth, and two fascinating glimpses of the childhood of Jesus.
6. *There are Christians who believe that not only all the much later Christmas glitz, but the detail given by Matthew and Luke, is un-necessary and unreliable colour added to the really important basic story: that (to quote John Betjeman) God became (hu)man in Palestine.* Some of them argue that Isaiah did not prophesy a virgin birth, but a birth to a young woman; and that the Divine nature of Jesus the Christ does not depend on Joseph having being excluded from his conception. For the first Christians, and indeed for mainstream Christian thinking down the

years, it really doesn't matter whether the familiar detail is literally true or not. **(Ours is pre-eminently an Easter Story, not a Christmas Story.)** If you want a short defence of the traditional version of the Christmas things, *Lee Strobel's "The Case for Christmas" published by Zondervan* is a good read, well referenced and well argued. For a good accessible discussion of the New Testament accounts and their Old Testament roots, try *Philip Greenslade's "The Perfect Gift: the birth of Jesus - the turning point of history", published by CWR.*

7. Even those who have forgotten much of their school history, know that Christmas was banned during the Commonwealth period of English history, between the murder of Charles I and the accession of Charles II. The puritans reckoned that the Christian Christmas had so far lapsed back into its pagan origins that the only sensible course was to keep the Incarnation, central doctrine of the Christian faith, and scrap the December 25th celebrations. There are those in the 21st Century who also argue for giving up on the Christmas that now extends from July to January, and encourages people to eat, drink and spend more than is good for them.
8. Asking the WWJHD question about keeping Christmas (what would Jesus have done?) is a good starting point for Christians, though answering it can appear rather presumptuous. Jesus seems to have enjoyed parties. (His critics condemned this tendency.) He wanted to invite to the party the outsiders excluded from everyone else's guest list. *Maybe it's not too far-fetched to imagine Jesus attending the Christmas office party, bringing with him the "Big Issue" seller and the old lady with her worldly goods piled on a pram.* Once at the party, he would have spotted and greeted the lonely person on the fringe of the group looking at their watch to see if they could decently escape.
9. Yes, the Samaritans are very busy at Christmas. But *the upside of Christmas is that good causes are supported, forgotten people remembered* and written to, presents given to some from whom you don't expect a present in return, carols serve as a reminder of things holy (however little their descriptions of the Nativity tally with the reality), children's eyes sparkle, and people who don't normally attend church give it a go. There is an old and anonymous Christmas exhortation that says going out of your way to help man and beast at Christmas is **walking with the angels and shining with the star.**

10. There is another way of doing Christmas that helps to bring it nearer to Christ Mass, and to keep it at a safe distance from Yule Tide and Santa Claus's Grotto. That is by **keeping Advent** - not by a chocolate a day from the Advent calendar, but by using Advent to prepare for Christmas as you might use Lent to prepare for Easter. *Joyce Huggett's "Approaching Christmas—Meditations for Advent", published by Lion*, is one useful resource. Giving up things during Advent is quite tricky, if you don't want to offend those who press goodies on you. Doing something extra, in the way of looking after people, contributing to good causes, Bible study, prayer, is not so difficult...though you may have to add another ten minutes to a late social night.
11. **Advent is a reminder of three things.** It is a reminder of the Incarnation, and of a new relationship between God and humanity. It is a reminder that every day has something of Christmas Day, because it is an **opportunity to encounter God, not least to encounter God in others.** It is a reminder of the Last Things, when God in Jesus will fold up this heaven and earth and create a new heaven and earth: which won't wear out, and won't go wrong.
12. As for celebrating Christmas itself, much depends on family and personal circumstances. If it brings more memories than enjoyment, enjoying other people's enjoyment if and when you get the opportunity is no bad thing. Those who come to the crib services on Christmas Eve can share something of the un-jaded excitement of the children—including the small boy who said, with no hint of smugness, "It's Jesus' Birthday today!" It is good to remember alongside the rather pricy, but well-affordable gifts of the Wise Men, that **the shepherds also came, and probably brought nothing but themselves.** Christmas isn't a gross expenditure competition!
13. *"The Other Wise Man"* is a good Christmas read, and a reminder of what presents are really about. The Church knows what it is doing with its Calendar, and *it isn't by accident that Christmas Day is followed immediately by St Stephen's Day (commemorating the first Christian martyr), St John's Day (commemorating the Apostle credited with writing most movingly about Christ, though silent on the Christmas details), Holy Innocents Day (when we remember child victims), and the day when we remember the murder of Thomas Becket at Canterbury.*  
August 2010.



## St George the Martyr Shirley



### Brief Notes

#### 7. Meeting Jehovah's Witnesses

1. If you live in St George's parish and are visited by two smartly-dressed and friendly people who want to talk about God, Jesus, the Bible and today's not altogether happy world, they are likely to be **Jehovah's witnesses**, and unlikely to be visitors from St George's church. If you respond favourably, you will be invited to subscribe to the "**Watchtower**" magazine (which is international, interesting and well written), and to sign up to Bible studies. If in due course you choose to attend meetings, you will be surrounded by an ethnically diverse group of ordinary people of various ages, all smartly-dressed and all (except the very youngest) carrying Bibles. The worship will be **Bible-based**, and will go on rather longer than most services at St George's. You will be made to feel welcome, but not un-naturally so.
2. If eventually you wish to become a member, there will be careful preparation followed by **Baptism by total immersion**. You will be made aware that your life-style is of concern to the whole congregation. For example, if you are in a relationship, it should be a married relationship. You will be expected not just to attend meetings every Sunday; but

a weeknight meeting, to study the Bible every day, and to train for and take part in witnessing ( **the Ministry**) - that is knocking on doors to share the good news or stopping people in the street. Being a Witness demands a fairly full-time commitment: several hours a week for all members, and restricting paid work to part-time to allow daytime witnessing on weekdays for many. There are regular large local or national gatherings, Assemblies, lasting two or three days - which members are expected to attend. Within the family, grace at meals is a norm, and a Witness dining out will say grace.

3. As a Witness, you will be expected to share your financial resources (usually modest) and your skills with your fellow Witnesses: most meeting places have to a substantial extent been built and furnished by Witnesses themselves, fed and watered by other Witnesses. If a "brother" or "sister" falls on hard times, the others help out in very practical ways. As a Witness, a lot of your social life will be spent with other Witnesses. If you are a married woman, whose husband is not a Witness, in matters domestic the man is boss, but in matters of religion the wife firmly goes her own way. (Witnesses have what some would describe as an old-fashioned attitude to marriage, and they would describe as a Biblical attitude to marriage .)
4. The older Christian tracts on Jehovah's Witnesses tend to focus on the rather odd late 19th Century American origins of the JWs, on their predictions of the date(s) for the end of the world, and on their opting out of what David Cameron calls the Big Society. Witnesses do believe that we are living in the last days (as did the Early Church), but they have given up any attempt to specify a date. **They do put witnessing before anything else**, and opt out of politics and in many cases out of having a career, but they are as likely to be good neighbours as anyone else; and their devotion to supporting a brother or sister in need also reflects the Early Church.
5. Unlike most Anglicans, but not unlike large sections of the Christian Church, they are opposed to women being in positions of leadership in the ministry of their organisation; but women play a large role in the work of the local Kingdom Hall. There are issues regarding the founders of the movement, but the Christian Church has not been without its black sheep in high places. JW ethics are strong and enforced: notorious sinners are excluded from the fellowship.

6. A member of the St George's congregation hearing a Jehovah's Witness pray will be struck by one unfamiliar and one familiar name. **Prayer is often made in the name of Jesus, named as God's Son** (and you are probably rather less likely to hear a JW use the name of Jesus loosely than you are to hear a Christian lapse into this). Prayer is made to **Jehovah**, because one of the basic tenets of the movement is that when God revealed to Moses His special name, that name was to be used for all time and is appropriately translated as Jehovah. (In Christian circles today, we would tend to say that the message from God to Moses was "**I AM WHO I AM**", or, if you listen to the Chief Rabbi, "**I AM WHO I WILL BE**". In other words, this was not a name to be used but a mystery to be respected.)
7. Jesus, for the Christian, is God Incarnate, not created by God but, along with the Holy Spirit, part of the Triune God from before the beginning of time. This is not an easy concept (and why should we expect God to be easy to understand when we struggle unsuccessfully to understand God's creation and each other!), and Jehovah's Witnesses are not alone in having opted for something simpler. **For Witnesses, Jesus is the Archangel Michael**, hugely important, very different from mere humans, but created by God at the beginning of time. Nor do they see the Holy Spirit as a distinctive Person, but only as the active force of God. The Crucifixion is important for Jehovah's Witnesses, and their annual Memorial (when bread and wine are passed round) celebrates that sacrifice. However, because, for them, Jesus is not God, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, and Life in Christ, do not mean for them what they mean for us. **A God who loves to the ultimate is very different from a God whose creatures love to the ultimate.**
8. The criticism that Witnesses only know selected texts from the Bible is questionable. They do focus on key texts (as do many Christians), but they study the Bible and know their way around the Bible to an extent that challenges Christians, who have much more to be thankful for but sometimes seem less thankful. However, a tendency to take literally what most Christians understand as powerful myth does produce some odd results. In Witness thinking, only 144,000 people will inherit Heaven; while the rest of those chosen will live on an earth restored to its original Garden of Eden state. The created world and universe are only as old as the chronology suggested by the Bible allows.

9. Witnesses take some pride in "being different". They do not celebrate Christmas, because of its pagan overtones. (Christians took over a pagan festival and Christianised it, though you might argue that in recent years the pagans have claimed Christmas back again!) They do not celebrate birthdays. They may opt their children out of a traditional school assembly (if they can find one to opt out of). They may step back from Charles Dickens "A Christmas Carol", because it highlights ghosts (as well as Christmas), or from the Harry Potter series, because of the magic theme. **They stand aside from civic life; and they put JW meetings and activities ahead of homework, college study, and paid work.** Being called to near full-time ministry is a privilege, not a hardship, and it is quite hard to imagine a "nominal" Jehovah's Witness who believes but doesn't do anything about it.
10. So how does the Christian respond to the Jehovah's Witness on the doorstep, assuming that the Christian is not one who is convinced that only members of a particular faction within the Church of England go to heaven? First, in charity: **knocking on doors and sharing your faith is not easy**, and the caller believes that he or she is doing it for your good. Second, on the basis that for the Christian now, and in the end for everyone, Jesus Christ is Lord, and the Way, the Truth and the Life; and Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, to whom all (human beings, and angels and devils if they exist) owe loving obedience. Then, thank you for calling, and blessings on you, and goodbye.
11. JW record-keeping is good, and it is as well to say nothing that invites a further call, unless you are up for the challenge of trying to turn the tables.....and for that you need to be as committed and as well trained as the caller. You can be sure that Christ, as he is merciful to us, will be merciful to those who work very hard and very faithfully in his name, although they don't, as yet, acknowledge who he is. We believe that in the Kingdom now and in the Kingdom (Heaven fulfilled on Earth) as it will be, *there is plenty of room for those who serve faithfully according to their lights*. Indeed, we can learn from them, despite fundamental disagreement.
12. Oh, and the bread and wine at the Memorial? It is passed round, but not eaten or drunk unless you believe yourself to be one of 144,000.

August 2010.

## **St George the Martyr Shirley**



### **Brief Notes**

#### **8. Women in the Church**

1. It may be helpful to start with two popular fiction series: Jean M Auel's "Earth's Children" series and Peter Tremayne's "Sister Fidelma" series. As these notes are being written, there is confirmation of sustained compassion in a Neanderthal community; and Jean Auel, who has based her fiction on meticulous research, shows that 30,000 years ago in the days of the Neanderthals and Cro Magnons the role of women was much more significant than the cave man caricature suggests. There were women leaders; and God was female. Peter Tremayne writes as an expert on 7th Century Ireland and its Celtic Church. At that time, male domination was creeping in from Rome, but woman leaders, heads of mixed religious houses, judges, priests, and bishops was a reality not a fancy. The idea that certain roles have always been male roles is an historical fallacy. The case for a male monopoly has to be argued on other grounds.

2. The account of women in the Bible of course begins with Eve, who was taken out of the side (not head or feet) of Adam because Adam complained to God that he was lonely. Quite where Adam and Eve's two sons (Cain and Abel) got their wives has puzzled generations of small children (and those adults determined to take Genesis literally, and convinced that it was dictated by God as the first book of the Bible rather than written centuries later in Biblical history). Attention has been rather artificially focussed on the part of the Adam and Eve story which has God saying that, after the Fall, Adam would be boss. But before the Fall, Adam and Eve seem to be equal partners, and the emphasis is on partnership not dominance.
3. As a generalisation, the Old Testament seems to have been written by men (there may be at least one exception), and most of the star players are men, and if someone is mentioned but not named it tends to be a woman. God is predominantly described in male terms; but by no means exclusively so, and the writers would have been horrified that some later readers misunderstood the male terminology to mean that God was a man.
4. Although not as prominent as men, women play a crucial role in the Old Testament story - very often in recognising the potential of the future male leaders and protecting them; but sometimes as leaders in their own right. Sarah was crucial for Abraham, Rebekah for Isaac, Rachel for Jacob, his sister for Moses, Miriam for Aaron and Moses, Hannah for Samuel. Miriam was also a prophetess in her own right, Deborah a judge in her own right. Ruth is perhaps the most memorable female character in the Old Testament, and one of the most

attractive characters male or female . From Ruth came the line of David.

5. The New Testament was probably also written mainly by men, though Luke may well have drawn on the memories of Mary of Nazareth. (The most likely exception is the Letter to the Hebrews, which has been attributed to Priscilla.) Again, men tend to dominate the narrative, and women are sometimes mentioned but not named. However, Jesus regularly broke the conventions of his time by teaching women, healing women, and including women among his closest followers. There is a tradition that the 70 disciples he sent out on the first grand missionary expedition were man and woman teams. The two disciples he met after his Resurrection on the road to Emmaus are thought to have been husband and wife.
6. In the New Testament, including the Epistles and the Book of Acts as well as the Gospels, the role of women is fundamental. It begins with Mary of Nazareth, and, rather in Mary's shadow, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist and the New Testament counterpart to Hannah. When Jesus is crucified, all the male disciples bar one had fled; but the women stood by him, including his mother. On the morning of the Resurrection, it is the women who come first to the tomb; and it is one woman, Mary of Magdala, who is chosen to be the first witness to the Resurrection and thus, in effect, the first Apostle. The Book of Acts and the Epistles show that women underpinned, financially and in other ways, the more prominent male missionaries.
7. It emphasises the role played by Jewish and other women in the worship and teaching of the home that Paul reminds Timothy that he was nurtured in the Christian Faith by his mother and grandmother. Augustine was only one of many great

Christian leaders of the early centuries who owed his grounding in the faith to the prayers and teaching of his mother; and Christian wives often brought royal husbands into the faith. The Saints and saints of the Church down the centuries have included many women—both saints who lived with the conventions of their time, and saints who broke all the conventions. They were teachers, martyrs, healers, mystics, counsellors, missionaries, nuns and mothers. Some were humble housewives, such as Margaret Clithero. Some were Queens, such as Elizabeth of Hungary. Some were only girls, such as Mary Jones, whose trek through the Welsh mountains in the hope of getting a bible inspired the creation of the Bible Society.

8. Today, the role of women in the Church continues to be disputed between and within the divided Churches. In some parts of the Anglican Communion, the debate is over: a woman heads the American Episcopal Church. The Church of England has accepted the principle that recognising the priestly ministry of women means recognising that (as many centuries ago!) God calls women as well as men to be bishops. The practicalities, given the opposition of some, have yet to be resolved. There is a strong movement within the Roman Catholic Church for the ordination of women.
9. The “theological” argument against the ordination of women is that the priest represents Christ, and Christ was male. Every Christian represents Christ, and the ministry of women as Christ’s representatives is huge in all Churches. (Most active Christians are women.) It is interesting to speculate whether, if the social conventions of the time had required God to be incarnate as a woman, we would be disputing the idea of male priests!

*October 2010*



**St George the Martyr  
Shirley**



**Brief 9  
Baptism and Confirmation**

1. You could argue that being a Christian is a personal thing: something between you and God, that doesn't need to involve anyone else, doesn't require any special ceremonies, and is much more about day-to-day commitment and relationship than about any big occasion when everything changes. Not all Christian Churches practice Baptism as a joining ceremony; among those which do, many do not have a separate Confirmation service. In Churches which practice only adult ("believer") Baptism, there is really no place for Confirmation.
2. The Church of England, and the rest of the Anglican Communion, has Baptism as the admission service (commonly though by no means always for babies), followed by Confirmation when the Baptised person is old enough to make his or her own choices. Admission to Communion used to be after Confirmation, but there is now the option for children who are old enough to know what they are doing to be prepared

for Communion before Confirmation. (This has been a norm in the Roman Catholic Church for some time.) Those who have not been Baptised before they decide to ask for Confirmation may be Baptised and Confirmed at the same service, or Baptised shortly before the Confirmation Service.

3. There have been times when it was argued that those who had not been Baptised before they died could not be with God in the next life. In some faiths, a Baptised believer can be Baptised for someone else (in the Mormon faith, this includes being Baptised for someone who is dead). Most Christians would now argue that the mercy of God is not constrained by a dividing line between Baptised and non-Baptised. (We can be fairly certain that the "Penitent Thief", to whom Jesus promised Paradise, had not been Baptised; and we don't know that all the Apostles had been Baptised.
4. The historical argument for Baptism is that Jesus himself was Baptised by John the Baptist; that Jesus is recorded at the end of Matthew's Gospel as instructing his followers to Baptise others in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and that it clearly was the established practice in the Early Church to Baptise new believers as a form of admission. Individual choices had to be made, but the New Testament is not written in terms of individual practicing their faith in isolation. It is written in terms of members of the Christian Community sharing in the common task of bringing in the Kingdom. Infant Baptism came later, though it may be implied in the "whole family" Baptisms in the Early Church. Initially, Infant Baptism was Christian parents vouching for their children.
5. The theological argument for Baptism is that God is well aware that we are humans living in a material world; and he uses water to bless and renew us - just as in other sacraments God uses bread and wine, or human hands. The soci-

ological argument for Baptism is that, as human beings, we do like to mark turning points with ceremonies. (Even atheists like ceremonies to mark significant events.) The word Baptism comes from the Greek for dipping or washing, and even Baptism which does not involve total immersion, symbolises a fresh start. Baptism clearly doesn't commit an infant to being a Christian. It does commit parents and godparents to helping the child at least explore the Christian faith. Not an inoculation, but an expression of hope by the adults involved *and by the local church* that a special blessing and a public ceremony will lead on to a personal faith and faith life. It is something to build on.

6. Confirmation emerged in the early days of the Christian Church, perhaps for those who had experienced Jewish Baptism (Baptism as a sign of turning away from an earlier sinful life), and were now welcomed and "confirmed" by the Apostles as Followers of the (Christian) Way. As Infant Baptism gained ground, it became necessary to have a ceremony in which more mature Christians (Baptised by the choice of others) could sign up for themselves...and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit to support their Christian life and witness. This ceremony was Confirmation - and Confirmation, like all Sacraments, was "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace". In other words, you can see and hear something of what is happening; but what goes on inside you is between you and God.
7. Both Baptism and Confirmation include spelling out the essentials of the Christian faith and the Christian life, and signing up to these. The signing up is both individual and collective; and again, while recognising that being a Christian can at times feel quite lonely, the individual Christian is part of a worldwide Church which goes back a long way in history, and

embraces both the present worldwide Christian family, and those who have gone before us and are still at one with us - in a Kingdom in which neither centuries nor indeed aeons count for much.

8. Baptism, Confirmation and Communion before Confirmation, all require preparation. In the days when Jesus' first followers were walking in his footsteps, there were those who saw the disciples doing great things and fancied the idea of buying into this powerful magic. There are still folk who, even if they are not wholly confident that magic exists, think it could be useful to tap into it just in case the magic really works. Jesus rather poured cold water on this when he told his would-be disciples that just about the only certainty was a cross to carry. Put less bleakly, anything really worthwhile involves effort, and all the sacraments make demands as well as offering support.
9. Jesus was brought up by a carpenter father, and did that heavy manual work himself for the adult part of the first thirty years of his earthly life. In line with his Jewish community, he knew that faith involved both thinking about things and doing something about things. The sacraments mix spiritual stuff and mundane stuff, in line with what we can see of Jesus' own ministry. Think beautiful thoughts, meet with God in prayer, and then - in the light of your possibilities and circumstances - get on with doing something about it. Signing up, in Baptism and Confirmation, is signing up to walking with God as closely as you can. God walks down the mean street, and through the mud; and not just down the church aisle. (Jesus got taken to task for choosing the most unsuitable friends in the most unorthodox places.)

*October 2010*